

Company Intranet Blog

Location, location, location – Why your smartphone may be smarter than you think



If you have an iPhone or an Android, it's quite possible that your smartphone is tracking your every move – if you haven't disabled “the feature”. Right now, unbeknownst to you, your phone could be tracking your whereabouts and recording the amount of time you're spending in your favorite places. But what is this feature? Who is receiving that data? And how can you turn it off?

“Frequent Locations”, a consumer-facing opt-in feature, introduced as part of the iPhone iOS 7 update allows your smartphone to track where you go and how long you stay in various places as you go about your daily routine. When it starts detecting patterns, it quite accurately marks places that you visit often as a frequent location.

Given enough data, or visits, your smartphone assumes your workplace location based on where you are during the day and your home address based on where you are at night. It also tracks all repeated visits to various locations regardless of time. Whether it's to a friend's house, your favorite restaurant or the local hangout, frequent locations is keeping track. But, iPhone users are not the only users being tracked; Google also has a similar feature on its Android phones. When you opt in to any location-based app, like Google Now or Google Maps, it activates the phone's location tracking – Google Location History.

Android phones have been capturing and recording users' GPS locations on Google's servers for quite some time. What's not commonly known is that the activity can be viewed online as the phone sends the tracking data to Google. Although Google says that users have the ability to "enable or disable location capabilities both on their Android device and Google Account," the fact remains, however that anyone with your password can gain access to your Google account and retrieve your location data.

Apple and Android maintain that the location features exist to improve the quality of their maps, and offer users a better virtual service experience, but to the unknowing, this feature can be a very unsettling reality. According to Apple's support website, location information is used to provide

personalized services and "it's kept solely on your device and won't be sent to Apple without your consent. It will be used to provide you with personalized services, such as predictive traffic routing."

Google also claims, "Your location history allows Google to show you useful information based on where you've been with the devices that you're signed in to with your Google Account... you'll see predictions for your frequent commutes and better search results."

Privacy is an obvious concern with this feature, and although it is entirely opt-in, many people do not know that the option exists or that it is enabled on their phones. If undesirable individuals, like hackers or identity thieves, could somehow access your data, they could easily find out where you live, where you work, the places you frequent and how long you visit certain places.

Using smartphones to track employees

Location is one of the most sensitive elements in one's life, and where we go is a huge part of our personal lives. The existence of that data and the fact that there is so much information available about our movements on a day to day basis poses a very real threat to privacy on many levels.

Recently, a California woman, Myrna Arias, filed a lawsuit against her employer, Intermex, claiming that she was fired because she removed an app on her work-issued smartphone which tracked her every move. She objected to her bosses knowing her whereabouts and what she did on her own time. The case has raised some complex digital privacy issues, including whether or not companies have the right to track employees all the time.

According to court documents employees were instructed to download the app, called Xora, to their phones. Xora, a workplace management app allows companies to remotely manage their workers by keeping track of their hours and other aspects of their job. The app uses GPS to allow bosses "to see the location of every mobile worker on a Google Map," according to their website.

The lawsuit alleges that after researching the app and speaking with a trainer from Xora, Arias and her co-workers asked whether Intermex would be monitoring their movements while off-duty. Arias boss, John Stubits admitted that employees would be monitored while off duty, and bragged that he knew how fast she was driving at specific times since she had installed the app on her phone.

Arias became uncomfortable when she realized her boss could physically track her nonstop and expressed that she had no problem with the app's GPS function during work hours, but objected to the monitoring of her location during non-work hours. Arias complained to Stubits that this was an invasion of her privacy, and that his actions were illegal. Stubits replied that she should tolerate the illegal intrusion, but Arias deleted the app, and few weeks later, she was fired.

Arias is currently seeking damages in excess of \$500,000 for invasion of privacy, wrongful termination and unfair business practices.

Turning it off

If you are unsettled by the fact that someone could be tracking your every move, the good news is that you can turn it off! You can easily wipe out your location history cache by tapping Clear History in the Frequent Locations section of Settings. Frequent Locations is not enabled by default and can be turned off at any time. Below are instructions for disabling these features on your iPhone or Android device.

For an iPhone

- Click on Settings from your home screen
- Click Privacy
- Click on Location Services
- Scroll down to System Services
- Click on Frequent Locations, turn it off (you can also clear the history of where you've been)

For an Android

- Click on Settings from the home screen
- Click on Location preferences
- Disable the Google Location History

Steps vary depending on your phone model. If you want more information about how to turn Google Location History on your Android, [visit Google's support site](#). iPhone users should [visit Apple's support site](#).

Stay informed

If privacy is a huge concern for you like it is for most people, research often, and stay up-to-date on your devices' software and privacy updates. Also, be sure to disable location services or turn off Location History features on your device. Users should also avoid apps that ask for your location data.

For more information about Sentry's Technology Usage Policy, refer to the [employee handbook](#).